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## The next wave

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**Animation doesn't have to mean slick, big-budget projects - many emerging artists are going back to basics to convey their message. Yolanda Zappaterra visits the Royal College of Art to find out what the animators of the future are up to**



With the release last month of the gorgeous, feisty animated feature *Coraline*, the appetite for hyper-polished, computer-generated animation shows no sign of abating. Is this direction of the form inevitable? In the future, will all animation aspire to look like Pixar projects? An obvious place to find out is at London's Royal College of Art, where trends are set by postgraduate students exploring a whole range of techniques. This year, what's been interesting, says RCA head of animation Joan Ashworth, is the move towards human concerns that infuse every aspect of the work, from the concept and development through to writing and realisation. Here we look at four trends she has identified. To see the completed work for yourselves, check out the final-year show next month.

### Factual and issues-based animation

Whether a reflection of the popularity of films like *Waltz With Bashir* and *Persepolis*, or students being way ahead of the curve, Joan Ashworth identifies factual or issues-based animation as a key trend. Two students are exploring this area in very different ways. Comfort Arthur's brutally funny tale of *Mad Val*, the flatmate from hell, uses simple, but assured line drawings (created in Flash) as an effective backdrop to some highly evocative writing.

*Mad Val* is drawn from Arthur's observations of her neighbours in a cramped close in south London. Drawing from real-life experiences, she finds, means 'the audience is taken through situations that they can identify with. I enjoy the fact that after they watch it they are left thinking of their own memories of similar situations.'

Veselina Dashinova's *What They Could Take With Them, They Took* mixes live-action documentary and animation to tell the wistful tale of the family of her great grandfather, forced to leave Turkey for Bulgaria. The mix of animation styles reflects the part fiction/part documentary story, something Dashinova considered carefully in developing the film. 'Drawing is such a personal expression, I needed the authenticity of the live action,' she explains.



### Light experimentation

'A reaction against the virtual' is how Joan Ashworth describes the expressionistic, abstract experimentation with light she regards as another trend. 'It's all to do with tangibility and texture,' she says.

One example is the work of Sarah Wickens, who has created a series of sunlight experiments that play with time and space. 'I noticed how the sun came through the windows in my bedroom, creating patches of light that moved throughout the day, as the sun changed position in the sky. So I started experimenting with ways of using that light to make animation, sticking cut-outs and stencils on to my windows to carve the light into different shapes. In all my work I like the images to have a physical presence, something tangible,' Wickens says.

### 2d/3d dialogue

This is best visualised in the work of Dave Prosser, a first-year student whose film *Clockwork* tells the story of a young boy trying to engage his tired dad in play with a clockwork boat, a beautifully realised 3D model within a 2D setting.

The boat acts a bridge between the two stark, monochrome environments of a highly detailed and textured 3D exterior world and an interior consisting of simple lines and white backgrounds. The striking difference between the two forms, and the interplay between them, combine to create a memorable atmosphere - particularly in the rich mining town exterior - and suggests great things for Prosser's second year.

### Hands-on/non-animation

Joan Ashworth believes the strongest trend she's seeing has been hands-on or anti animation, the combining of live action with objects, or artists experimenting with putting themselves or interactivity in the frame, again as a reaction against the virtual and digital. Jöns Mellgren's *Snowglobe* is a stunning example, his beautiful paper-sculpture scenes exploding in this tale of childhood betrayal. It's a rounded, intelligent film that is literally multilayered, 'a hybrid of hand-built paper sets filmed live, with composited animated characters on top. I like working with real, physical objects, because they force me to solve problems in very concrete ways,' says Mellgren.



Tom Judd puts himself right in the frame in *Grids*, a first-year conceptual piece in which viewers interact with an animation framework using grids rather than a linear reel of frames, built by Judd. It's a piece that illustrates his interest in real-world interactivity and 'how traditional animation can survive as new media content'. These issues are taken further in his more recent graduation work, 'a project started as a simple doodle and narrative based around facial

paralysis in Botox users'.

Mikey Please's *We Are As Men As We Were Once Then* is an understated, subtle film in which Please uses a combination of live-action puppetry with hand-drawn animation 'as a way to balance the intricate and controlled with something a little more chaotic'. Finally, Martin Earle's film *A Galaxy Over There*, based on a poem by Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer about Franz Schubert, visualises the poet being carried away from his home city through the experience of listening to the composer's music and coming back to find his once familiar surroundings imbued with depth, colour and hope. 'I would like storytelling and film to do just that - to carry us away, but then to bring us back filled with a new wonder for what has always surrounded us,' says Earle.

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